


What would Donald Trump's second term as US President be like and what it means for India?

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Several US allies – in the European Union (EU) and Indo-Pacific – are worried at the prospects of a Trump Presidency -- which seems more probable due to the confusion in the ranks of the Democratic Party ahead of the 2024 presidential election which is months away. Current US President and Democrat candidate Joe Biden pulled out of the presidential race and endorsed US Vice President Kamala Harris as the party's presidential candidate, said Biden in a statement:

"It has been the greatest honour of my life to serve as your President. And while it has been my intention to seek re-election, I believe it is in the best interest of my party and the country for me to stand down and to focus on fulfilling my duties as President for the remainder of my term".

For the EU, the worry is Trump's repeated announcements that the US would end the war by ending military support for Ukraine. While speaking at the Republican National Convention (Milwaukee), on July 18, 2024 Donald Trump said that the world is in world war 3 and that he would end "... the horrible war in Ukraine and Russia".

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Viktor Orban, PM of Hungary – currently – is at odds with the EU since he has pitched himself as 'peacemaker' and visited Russia, China much to the chagrin of other EU member states. Orban gets along well with Trump and met with the Republican candidate on July 11,

2024 at Trump's La-Margo (Florida) residence. Orban, dubbed a right-wing populist, and Trump are supposed to have discussed ways for bringing about an end to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

JD Vance, Trump's running mate, has a similar approach towards Russia and has repeatedly stated that China is the biggest threat for the US and Washington should focus on the challenges Beijing poses to it.

Russia while reacting to Trump's statements has said that it is important to be realistic.

Russia's Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said it is important to be cautious regarding "pre-election rhetoric" and being realistic.

On July 19, 2024 Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy held a telephonic conversation. Trump during the conversation is supposed to have reiterated his commitment towards bringing the Russia-Ukraine war to an end.

Trump's approach on key foreign policy issues: Opportunities and challenges for India

India would be closely watching Trump's approach towards Russia-Ukraine conflict. While the Biden administration has not openly criticised India's decision to purchase oil from Russia, PM Modi's recent visit to Russia, co-inciding with the NATO meeting in Washington was watched closely. While speaking days after Modi's meeting with Putin, US Ambassador to India, Eric Garcetti while alluding to India's stance on the Russia-Ukraine conflict said, "we must not just stand for peace, we must take concrete actions to make sure those who don't play by peaceful rules, that their war machines cannot continue unabated".

He also said, that neither side can take each other for "granted". India while reacting to Garcetti's statements said that both sides could agree to disagree.

The US State Department said that it sought India's assistance ".. to realise an enduring and just peace for Ukraine," India would clearly welcome an end to the Russia-Ukraine war and would certainly be observing Trump's statements.

A few points need to be borne in mind. First, there were differences on economic issues between both countries during Trump's previous tenure (this includes tariffs, Trump's approach towards H1B visas). While those can be navigated, some of Trump's advisors have suggested that the Trump administration should penalise countries which are going for de-dollarization (trade in local currencies and reduction on the US dollar). India is one of the countries which has gone for de-dollarisation – especially after the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

While in his previous tenure, Trump did focus on strengthening partnerships within the Indo-Pacific, his transactional approach towards trade and security issues sent wrong signals to several countries. Biden on the other hand has strengthened alliances with countries within the Indo-Pacific and focused on synergies.

Trump could follow a tougher approach vis-à-vis Iran. India stopped purchase of oil from Iran in May 2019 (after the Trump administration removed the waivers, from sanctions, which it had provided to India and other countries for purchase of oil from Iran) though New Delhi managed to get waivers from sanctions for the Chabahar Port.

While work on the Chabahar Project had slowed down and New-Delhi-Tehran ties had got impacted after India's decision to stop purchase of oil from Iran in 2019, India has shown greater urgency with regard to the project, given its importance not just as a gateway to Central Asia, Iran and Afghanistan but also as part of the International North South Transport Corridor -- INSTC (in May 2024 India and Iran signed a 10 year contract for the operation of the Chabahar Port project).

If US-Iran ties were to deteriorate under a Trump Administration, New Delhi's ties with Tehran may not remain unaffected. While it is true that given the current turbulence in the Middle East, there is a distinct possibility of Washington-Tehran ties going downhill, one important factor to note is that Saudi Arabia's ties with Iran have improved significantly (Saudi Arabia and Iran resumed diplomatic ties through an agreement signed in 2023). Saudi Arabia could play a possible role in reducing tensions between the US, under Trump and Iran. Iran's President elect Masoud Pezeshkian also is a pragmatist who favours dialogue with the west.

In conclusion, Donald Trump is likely to give precedence to US interests, while there could be some convergence between New Delhi and Washington DC, there could also be challenges for India. It is important for India to thus have realistic expectations from a Republican dispensation under Trump.

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